

First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN

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Introduction¹

Two-and-a-half months ago, when we were just getting started on the letter to the Hebrews, I told you about the terrible persecution that Christians faced back then. At first it was the Jews themselves who persecuted them. Then, we read in Acts 18:2, the Roman Emperor Claudius threw both the Jews and the Christians out of Rome, in 49 A.D. But the worst was yet to come.

Historians tell us that it was on this day in history, July 18, 64 A.D., that a terrible fire broke out in the city of Rome. The historian Tacitus wrote that it was the worst fire Rome had ever had. The fire spread from house to house, from building to building, and for six days it raged in that city. When finally it was over, people were murmuring about who was to blame. A rumor broke out that it was Emperor Nero himself who had set the fire.

Nero wasted no time pinning the blame for the fire on the Christians. It was easy. People hated them anyway. He rounded up all those who confessed they were Christians, and then, after hearing from them about others who were Christians, he rounded up even more – and then, he tortured and killed them. The historian Tacitus wrote, “In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights.”²

Whether the letter to the Hebrews was written to people in Rome or not, whether it was written during the reign of Nero or not, this was the kind of cruelty Christians faced back then. And that’s one reason why the letter to the Hebrews is so full of encouragement and exhortation for those early Christians to hold fast.

But persecution isn’t the only thing that Christians faced back then. They faced temptation, too. They faced the deceitfulness of sin, just like you and I do. That’s why, later in the letter to the Hebrews, there are exhortations to “stir up one another to love and good works,” and to be careful not to get in the habit of skipping church meetings nor to go on sinning deliberately in other ways.

It’s bad enough for a professing Christian to harden his heart and turn his back on Christ when he faces persecution. But it’s even worse if he does it for much less. Which do you think would be a greater triumph for Satan? For you to fall away because of fear of persecution, or for you to fall away because of far less temptation? For Satan to enslave us with a whisper is a greater triumph than for him to enslave us with a whip. And we are all facing the deceitful whisper of sin constantly.

Without help, how can we possibly resist that whisper? We are weak. We are frail. We are needy. And that is why we read in Hebrews 3:13 that we must “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of [us] may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” God helps us

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2 Tacitus, *Annals*, book XV, ch. 44.

by bringing us together in the church, so that we can help one another. But that is not the only way God helps us. God also helps us by pouring out his mercy and grace in countless ways to all who seek him through Jesus Christ.

That is exactly what we see at the conclusion of this warning passage that I have been preaching on for a month now. God does offer us help through Jesus his Son. Without that help, we would be helpless. Without that hope, we would be hopeless. We would get to that last verse that we saw last Sunday, “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account,” (Heb 4:13) and we would cry out, How can I ever endure by my own strength? Without God’s help, I’m a failure! But the writer of Hebrews, as if he can hear us crying out in frustration, reminds us of what he said at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. Jesus Christ is our merciful and faithful high priest! And because of that, we can be utterly confident that God will help us to the end:

Hebrews 4:14-16 14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Here in these three verses there are two exhortations. One we’ve seen before: “let us hold fast our confession,” in v. 14. The other is in v. 16: “let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.” But I’m going to argue that the last one serves the first one – the main point here is to *hold fast our confession*. And here in these three verses there are three reasons we can hold fast:

- We can hold fast because of who Jesus is
- We can hold fast because of what Jesus knows
- We can hold fast because of what Jesus offers

I. We Can Hold Fast Because of Who Jesus Is

Let’s begin in v. 14, where we see that we can hold fast our confession because of who Jesus is. Jesus is “a great high priest who has passed through the heavens!” Let’s look at each part of that. First, Jesus is a great high priest, and second, Jesus has passed through the heavens.

A. Jesus is a great high priest

First, Jesus is a great high priest. Now, I want to answer two questions: What does that mean? And what difference does it make? What could this possibly have to do with the main point of v. 14 that we “hold fast our confession?”

First, what does it mean that Jesus is a great high priest? We’re going to spend a lot of time on this in the weeks to come, because the writer of Hebrews is going to say a lot more about this. For now, I will simply say that a high priest is somebody who goes to God on our behalf to make atonement for our sins.

You see, a priest is someone who intercedes for his people. He goes to God as a representative of his brothers and sisters. And that's what Jesus does. He goes to God the Father as our representative. But he is more than just a priest. He is a *high* priest. The high priest of the Old Testament offered up sacrifices for the sin of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement each year. Jesus, as our *great* high priest, has offered himself up once for all to atone for our sins. All those sacrifices of all those bulls and goats that all those high priests of old offered to God could only point to the one perfect sacrifice of the one great high priest, Jesus.

But what difference does this make? What does this have to do with holding fast our confession? I can think of at least two ways that this helps us hold fast. One way this helps us hold fast is that in Jesus we have a high priest who intercedes for us, so that God will help us hold fast. I'm going to say more about that in a few minutes. But there is another way this helps us hold fast. It helps us to know that not only is our faith not in vain, but that our faith in Christ is the only way to peace and joy with God.

Let me explain. First, knowing Jesus is our great high priest helps us hold fast our confession because we know our faith is *not in vain*. Jesus really is who he said he was, when he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." (Joh 14:6b) And second, knowing Jesus is our great high priest helps us hold fast our confession because we know that our faith is the *only* way – as Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6c)

There is a terrible lie out there that all religions are basically the same. Oh, we may call our gods by different names – God, Allah, Buddha, etc. – and we may worship them in different ways, but in the end there's really no difference. That is a lie. Believe that lie, and your faith will be shipwrecked. Believe that lie, and your heart will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin – after all, if each religion is just an invention of man, why not invent your own personal religion that lets you keep what you like and throw away the rest?

The truth is that different religions are *not* all basically the same. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and he is the *only* way, the *only* truth, and the *only* life. *No one* can come to the Father except through Jesus, not you, not me, not anybody in Granite Falls nor the Upper Sioux Reservation nor Iran nor Thailand nor Japan nor anywhere else in the world. Because Jesus, the Son of God, is our one and only great high priest who goes before us to God his father. And so, when the deceitfulness of sin whispers to us, we cling to the rock of Jesus Christ, our great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

B. Jesus has passed through the heavens

This brings us to the second part of what v. 14 says about Jesus. Jesus is a great high priest "who has passed through the heavens." Now what does *this* mean? Part of the answer is pretty simple – it means that when Jesus died for us, he did not stay dead. When he was buried in a tomb, he did not stay in the tomb. We do not just remember a great high priest who died. We worship a great high priest who

lives so that we can be liberated from lifelong slavery to sin, and be reconciled to God.

Jesus rose again and ascended into heaven, where he acts as our great high priest right now! He wasn't just a wise man who set a good example that we should follow. He wasn't just a champion of the oppressed who showed us how to think about the outcasts of society. He wasn't just a compassionate man who showed us how to care for the poor and the sick. He was all of these things, but he is much more. He is our great high priest who lives at the right hand of the Father Almighty to make intercession for us on *God's* terms, with eternal consequences.

So many get this wrong and make a mockery of Jesus Christ. So many throw away the one all-important idea that this is all about being reconciled to God on *his* terms, in *his* way, through the great high priest that *he* has appointed. They choose a twisted thing they call "Christianity" that is just about liberating the oppressed and feeding the hungry and healing the sick in the here and now, not about coming to God through a great high priest who has passed through the heavens so that we may be liberated from lifelong slavery to sin, so that we may not have hearts hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. And when they throw all that away, they are left with a Jesus of their own invention, a Jesus of their own darkened understanding, and there is no limit to the depravity that they will embrace in the name of Jesus.

That's why the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America embraced homosexuality a year ago, and that's why the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America did the same thing a couple weeks ago, along with many other so-called churches across the land (including many who call themselves Baptists). Now openly-practicing homosexuals can be ordained as pastors by these denominations. How did that happen? It happened by turning away from our great high priest who has passed through the heavens and who sits at the right hand of the Father. It happened by turning away from making peace with God through Jesus, our living, great high priest, and turning instead to making peace with the deceitfulness of sin.

But for those who truly have faith in Christ, there is great hope and great comfort and great joy in knowing that he is our great high priest who has passed through the heavens, because for those who truly have faith in Christ, nothing matters more than peace with *God*. Our one great hope, our one great comfort, our one great joy, is that we can hold fast our confession in Jesus Christ on *his* terms, in utter subjection to the Word of God, because of who Jesus is – and because of what Jesus knows.

II. We Can Hold Fast Because of What Jesus Knows

This brings us to the next verse in our passage this morning, and the next point of this sermon. We can hold fast our confession, v. 15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Let's look at the two parts of this verse so that we

can understand what it means and how it changes our lives. First, Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses. And second, he has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

A. Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses

Not that these are two ideas that can really be separated. They go together. They are two parts of one big idea – Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses *because* he has been tempted as we are. But let's stop and think about the first part of this idea: "Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses." What does that mean, and why does it matter? Why difference does it make that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses?

To understand what this means, you have to first understand what "our weaknesses" are. The answer is right here in what we have already read in this letter to the Hebrews. Our weaknesses are a lack of strength to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." (2:1) We have weaknesses that would lead us to have "evil, unbelieving heart(s)" leading us to "fall away from the living God." (3:12) We have weaknesses that would lead us to "be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." (3:13) And because the Word of God is our judge (4:12), it is the Word of God that defines what sin is, it is the Word of God that defines what faith is, and it is the Word of God that defines who God is. Our weaknesses would lead us to turn away from the Word of God to follow a god of our own invention, and harden our hearts against faith in the God of the Bible.

Jesus sympathizes with those weaknesses. In other words, he understands them. He's been there. He's walked a mile in your shoes. He's been tempted like you have been. But before I get to that, let's stop and think about why this matters.

This matters because it shows how much Jesus loves you. Jesus, the Son of God, loves you so much that he put on flesh and blood so that he could identify with you. Not only did this qualify him to be your high priest, a priest who can represent us human beings as a human being himself, but it showed us how tenderly he cared for us and how tenderly he cares for us *right now*. A cruel god would never do this. A merciless god would never do this. Only a kind, merciful, loving God would take on flesh and blood and skin and bones and live on this earth the way you and I live, and go through the same things that you and I face.

Think about it. Do you really think the Son of God *learned* anything new when he was born as the man Jesus? No. He did not learn anything new. Before he created the world, he already understood the weaknesses that you would have. He understood them perfectly. He did not say, "I wonder what it's like to be a man. I think I'll become a man, so that I can find out." And when he lived his life on earth, he did not say, "Oh, so that's what it's like!" No, our all-knowing God never learns anything new. But by doing what he did, by the Son of God becoming the man Jesus and living our life with us, he showed us that he not only understands our weaknesses, but that he cares very much for us as we face them. Our high priest walked a mile in our shoes so that we would know this is *personal*. Our high priest loves us *that much*. And he loves you so much that right here, right

now, he is reassuring you in Hebrews 4:15 that he has been where you are, he knows what you are facing, and he knows exactly what you need.

But is this really true? Does Jesus *really* sympathize with *your* weaknesses? What if you're a woman? Jesus wasn't a woman. What if you're an older person? Jesus died when he was only 33 years old. And after all, we're all Americans, living in the 21st century, surrounded by all sorts of things that didn't even exist back when Jesus lived. And an even bigger question is, if Jesus never sinned, how can he really know just how terrible our own weaknesses are, we who actually know what it is like to sin?

B. Jesus has been tempted as we are, yet without sin

But the Bible says, here in Hebrews 4:15, that Jesus “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” And that means exactly what it says. The Son of God really did face temptation when lived out his life here on earth as the man Christ Jesus. He was tempted just like you and I are tempted; he faced real temptation to commit real sin, and he faced the full range of temptation that you and I face.

It doesn't matter that he lived as a man and never faced temptation as a woman. It doesn't matter that he died young and never faced temptation as an older person. It doesn't matter that he lived 2,000 years ago in the Roman Empire and never faced temptation in our day and age. None of that matters, because sin is sin and temptation is temptation for all people, at all ages, in all places, at all times. That's why the Bible says, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.” (1Co 10:13a) Sure, some of the details may be a little different depending on the person or the age, but the categories of temptation are still the same – things like pride, greed, sexual lust, and anger. Jesus was tempted to lie, to cheat, to steal. He was tempted to disobey and dishonor his parents, to take revenge, and to commit fornication and adultery. He was tempted to turn away from his Heavenly Father. But never did Jesus indulge any of these temptations. Never did Jesus sin.

Still, some ask, if Jesus never sinned, how can he really know just how terrible our own weaknesses are, we who actually know what it is like to sin? But think about that for a minute and you will see how absurd that question is. Who knows, really knows, what temptation is like – the one who caves in with just a little temptation, or the one who endures the *full measure* of temptation?

Think of it this way. Let's say two soldiers are taken prisoner. Both of them are tortured, because the enemy wants to know everything those soldiers know about their battle plans. After five minutes, one of those soldiers can't take it any more, and he opens up his mouth and tells them everything he knows. But the other soldier endures the torture for hours and hours, but he never says a word. Can you imagine the soldier who caved in after five minutes saying to that other soldier, “You just don't know what it was like for me!” No. The soldier who endures the most torture is the one who really knows how bad it can get.

So it was for Jesus. How many times have you and I caved in to temptation without thinking twice? But Jesus did not cave in. He is the one who really knows how bad it can get. And every minute that he endured temptation, every minute that he felt the allure of sin, he experienced the weakness of the flesh. Jesus knows better than any of us just how weak a man feels when he faces the *full* measure of temptation, because Jesus never caved in. He never sinned. He was “in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

So Jesus really does know what it’s like for us. He really does sympathize with our weaknesses. And because of that, we have a great high priest who knows what we truly need in our moment of weakness. But this brings us to one of the greatest verses in the Bible. In v. 16 of our passage this morning, we see that Jesus not only *knows* what we need in our moment of weakness, he *actually offers us access to* what we need – and God exhorts us to come to him and get it!

III. We Can Hold Fast Because of What Jesus Offers

Look at v. 16: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Here we see that Jesus gives us access to the throne of grace – and because of that, he gives us access to help in time of need.

A. Jesus gives us access to the throne of grace

The “throne of grace” is God’s throne. And if it weren’t for Jesus, you and I could never be purified of our sins, and we could never draw near to that throne for anything but judgment. “For,” the Bible says, “you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.” (Psa 5:4-5)

If you are wicked, then you can’t come before God’s throne with any confidence whatsoever – God’s throne to you is not a throne of grace but of condemnation. If you are guilty, the only thing you can possibly expect from God’s throne is terrifying judgment.

But Jesus changes everything. Just look back at the last part of Hebrews 1:3! “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high!” Jesus died on the cross to make purification for our sins, and passed through the heavens as our great high priest to make atonement for the sins of all who believe.

And because of that, we who have faith in Jesus need not be afraid of the throne of God any longer. Because of that, we who have faith in Jesus are no longer running away from God’s throne. We are running *towards* God’s throne!

Hebrews 9:24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

We're going to hear much more about this as we continue our study in this letter to the Hebrews. For now, let us simply marvel that our merciful, faithful, understanding, great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God, has rolled out the red carpet of his blood before the throne of God so that we can enter joyfully into his presence, and receive grace and mercy instead of judgment and condemnation.

Do you realize what this means? It means that if you have faith in Jesus Christ, you have direct access to God himself. You do not need me, you do not need any other priest, you do not need *anybody* but Jesus to come before God! The Bible says, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1Ti 2:5)

I'll never forget the day I shared that with my wife, back in the days before we were engaged to be married. She grew up in the Roman Catholic church, where she was taught that she needed a Roman Catholic priest to give her access to the mercy and grace of God's throne. In the Roman Catholic church, if you want grace, you need a Roman Catholic priest to dispense that grace to you through the sacraments. But that is a lie. The truth is that *Jesus Christ* is our one and only high priest, and he gives every single believer direct access to the throne of grace. When my wife heard this from the Bible, it changed her life. For the first time, she went straight to God and prayed to him in the name of Jesus Christ alone!

And because Jesus Christ gives us access to the throne of grace, that's exactly where we should be going. Jesus hasn't given us access to the throne of grace just so we can sing about it. He has given us access to that throne because we *need* that access! We *must* draw near!

B. Jesus gives us access to help in time of need

That's the whole point of v. 16. Why does it matter so much that we can draw near to the throne of grace? Why should we run to the throne of God? "That we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need!"

Do you know what that means? It means that when we are facing temptation, God offers us help. This isn't about praying to God when we are poor and need money. This isn't about praying to God when we are sick and need healing. Yes, it is good to pray to God for those things, but that's a different sermon. Right here in Hebrews 4:16, this is about praying to God for mercy and grace to help us hold fast our confession.

This is about praying to God lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. That's the whole point here. That's why it matters so much that Jesus has been tempted as we are – because he intercedes for us when *we* are tempted. He acts as our great high priest before the throne of God when we are tempted. He sympathizes with our weaknesses when we are weak, when we are in need, and stands before us at God's throne so that we get the mercy and grace that we need at that moment.

Oh, how we need God's mercy, God's pity, God's compassion! We are so frail. We are so weak. Without God's help, we would break like withered branches at the slightest gust of wind. But with God's help, with God's mercy, with God's grace, we shall stand fast in the strongest gale of temptation. Not even a cruel emperor like Nero can break us, not even our own lusts can break us, because nothing can separate us from the mercy and grace that is ours in Jesus Christ as we draw near to his Father's throne!

Before I conclude, let me remind you that this is a matter of the heart. The help we need is to have believing hearts. This changes the way we pray. For instance, don't pray to God to help you bite your tongue because in your heart you want to say something terrible. Don't pray to God to help you count to ten because in your heart you've already lost your temper. Pray to God to help you so that you don't have to bite your tongue, and so that you don't have to count to ten. Pray to God for a heart of faith that is set free from lifelong slavery to sin, a heart of faith that rejects the deceitfulness of sin and embraces the truth of God's loving promises. And when you do, Jesus Christ will be there, interceding for you at his Father's throne!

Conclusion

So draw near to God's throne! Run to God's throne! Cling to God's throne! Is there ever a moment when we are not needy? Is there ever a moment when we can live without God's mercy and grace? We need it more than the air we breathe. How long can you hold your breath? A minute? Two minutes? That's longer than you can hold fast to your confession without God's help.

Without Jesus, we would suffocate and fall away. But with Jesus, we are more than conquerors. We can hold fast because of who Jesus is – our great high priest. We can hold fast because of what Jesus knows – he sympathizes with our weaknesses. And we can hold fast because of what Jesus offers – he gives us access to mercy and grace at his Father's throne.

Why do you think God is telling you this, this morning? It's because he loves you. God loves you so much that right here, right now, he is telling you that all this is yours, if you will accept it. This great high priest, Jesus, his Son. This loving, tender, understanding, Jesus, who sympathizes with your weaknesses. This mountain of riches, the very mercy and grace of God, that Jesus bids you to come and receive without limit. God loves you!

So "pray without ceasing!" (1Th 5:17) Draw near to God's throne! Beg for mercy and grace to help you hold fast to your faith in Jesus!

And rejoice that in Jesus Christ, it is yours.